

Housing
in
New York City

A Chronology

by *Hall Winslow*
Elsie Woods

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HOUSING IN NEW YORK CITY -- A CHRONOLOGY

1613 Four years after Henry Hudson discovered Manhattan, Adrian Block built the first houses for white men on the land now occupied by 41 Broadway.

"They soon learned that they themselves, in their way of living, were their own worst enemies. Not the Indians but the houses took the toll."

1648 The first housing law for New York City dealt with fire prevention.

"It has been noticed and seen by the Director General of New Netherland...that some careless people neglect to have their chimneys properly swept and that they do not take care of their fires, whereby lately fires broke out in two houses and further troubles may be expected in the future. Henceforth no wooden or merely plastered chimneys shall be put into any houseAnd if anybody's house is burned either by negligence or his own fire, he shall pay a fine of 25 florins."

This law was the beginning of a long succession of steadily strengthening laws dealing with sanitation, zoning of residential and industrial uses and laying out regular streets and lots.

"...henceforth no hogs or goats shall be pastured or kept between Fort New Amsterdam and its vicinity and the Fresh Water, unless within the fences of the owners, so made that the goats cannot jump over and damage anyone."

1676 "That there be Sworne Surveyors Apoynted for this Citty by whose Advise and Directions, the ground within this Citty Shall be Built...they Shall Direct that A Regular Order and Uniformity may be Kept and Observed in the Streetes...."

1736 1700

Small-town New York had a population of five thousand, including seven hundred non-whites.

1776

During the British occupation the Great Fire destroyed most older houses.

"On Saturday the 21st Instant, we had a terrible Fire in this City, which consumed about One Thousand Houses, or nearly a fourth of the whole City....The Rebel Army having carried off all the bells of the City, the Alarm could not be speedily communicated...the Pumps and Fire-Engines were very much out of Order....Many Hundreds of Families have lost their all; and are reduced from a State of Affluence to the lowest Ebb of Want and Wretchedness -- destitute of Shelter, Food or Clothing...."

1784
to
1795

Fifty thousand English, German and Dutch immigrants arrived in a decade characterized by basement slums, open sewers and disease in "river housing." A series of yellow fever epidemics struck the city. In 1795 yellow fever killed 732 people. An exhaustive report to the Common Council cited as causes of disease:

- I. Deep Damp Cellars and Filthy Sunken Yards
- II. Unfinished Water Lots
- III. Public Slips
- IV. Sinks and Privies
- V. Burial Grounds
- VI. Narrow Streets
- VII. Sailors Boarding Houses and Tipling Houses
- VIII. Digging up Made Ground
- IX. Putrid Substances, whether animal or vegetable
- X. Water

1797

Three Commissioners of Health for New York City were appointed

"...to make and execute rules and orders for cleaning and scouring the streets, allys, passages, vaults, sinks and other places within the said city...."

1799

Gracie Mansion, now the official residence of the Mayor, was built by Archibald Gracie, a merchant prince, on the site of an old Revolutionary fort. It is an example of the fine country houses which once occupied all of Upper Manhattan.

1800 Beginning of row-houses expansion. The New York row house was characterized by a stoop six or more steps high with a basement door below and hand-wrought ironwork railing and gates.

1803 Trinity Church parish created St. John's Park, a rare American imitation of London residential planning. The Park, now vanished, was bounded by Varick, Hudson, Beach and Laight Streets, just south of the present approaches to the Holland Tunnel. Trinity, which held most of the real estate in Lower Manhattan, attempted to control the quarter by ninety-nine-year leases, but yielded to the tenants' demands for freeholds and sold the properties.



1807 "Houses in the Broadway are lofty and well built...in the English style and differ but little from those in the West End of London except they are universally built of red brick. -- John Lambert, traveller.

1811 Commissioners Gouverneur Morris, Simeon De Witt and John Rutherford prepared the basic street and lot plan for Mid- and Upper Manhattan, a rectangular gridiron pattern relieved by one radial street, Broadway, already a high road. The plan encouraged long narrow row houses, rear-lot buildings and the later dumbbell tenement.

1819 Brooklyn Heights was offered as the first suburban development. An advertisement for lots ran:

"Families who may desire to associate in forming a select neighborhood and circle of society, for a summer's residence or a whole year's, cannot anywhere obtain more desirable situations...."

1830

The notorious "Five Points" district, converging at Cross, Anthony, Little Water, Orange and Mulberry Streets [now Park, Worth, Baxter and Mulberry], was condemned as a focus of social and housing problems and a source of cholera. Chatham Towers, a middle-income cooperative, is being built on this site.

"The old tenements began to crumble or sink into the improperly drained swamps, and became unsafe for occupancy, and the malarial odors and vapors arising from the marshlands made the whole area dangerous to health....The Old Brewery was the heart of the Five Points, and was the most celebrated tenement building



in the history of the city....It had been transformed into a dwelling...having become so dilapidated that it could no longer be used for its original purpose.... The cellars of the Old Brewery were divided into some 20 rooms...and there were about 75 chambers above-ground....During the period of its greatest renown the building housed more than 1000 men, women and childrenThe Old Brewery averaged a murder a night."

--Herbert Asbury, The Gangs of New York

Charles H. Haswell, a contemporary, called the district

"...a locality that attained a national reputation as the resort of the abandoned of both sexes and of all nations...."

On June 21, 1835, the Five Points erupted into rioting.

1830

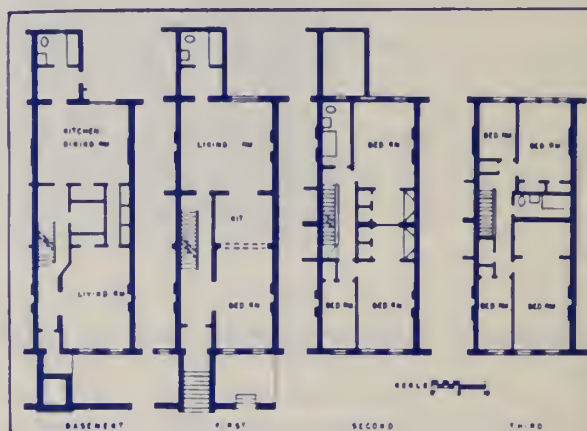
Gramercy Park, still maintained as a private park, was opened. The Park interrupts Lexington Avenue, creating a quiet residential island.

- 1835 | "On the evening of the 16th of December, the great fire, as it was then and since has been termed, broke out between eight and nine o'clock at No. 25 Merchant Street, now Hanover Street. The area covered by it was computed at fifty acres, being bounded by South Street, Coenties Slip, Broad and Wall Streets, including twenty blocks of buildings, the Merchants Exchange, the Post-office, and two churches....The loss was estimated at fifteen millions of dollars....The insurance companies were all (or very nearly all) made bankrupt....Yet such were the enterprise, the courage, and elastic temper of the city that, only in the next February, twenty lots in the burned district were sold by auction for more than they would have brought before the fire, when occupied by valuable buildings. --Charles H. Haswell, Reminiscences of an Octogenarian of the City of New York
- 1836 | "Splendid squares and streets are opening on every side like some brilliant vision. New York in wealth, population, business resources, and beauty will equal every city in the world....It approaches every year to the dignity and grandeur of Paris and London. But with all its glorious advantages--it is the filthiest, dustiest, muddiest, worst-managed and most neglected city extant. --New-York Mirror
- 1837 | Irish, English and German immigration grew, continuing through the 1840's.
- 1842 | The Griscom Report, an exhaustive survey of housing conditions in New York, pointed out the high incidence of disease among immigrants due to crowded housing. Dr. Griscom reported:
- | "We are parties to their degradation, inasmuch as we permit the inhabitation of places, from which it is not possible improvement in conditions or habits can come. We suffer the sub-landlord to stow them, like cattle, in pens, and to compel them to swallow poison with every breath. They are allowed, may it not be said required, to live in dirt, when the reverse, rather, should be enforced. This depressed physical condition, and bad moral and social habits and propensities, to my mind have an intimate relation to each other. It follows, therefore, that a correction of the physical, will tend to abate the moral evils of the community...."

1844 First street sewers, not yet connected to houses.

1850 Fifty years of large-scale tenement construction began. Mid-century low-income rental housing was characterized by (1) old frame houses converted to small units (2) the barracks-type tenement (3) squatter shanties on the outskirts of the city (4) the sub-landlord system.

1850 to 1890 The Brownstone Era. Attached brick buildings, veneered with red sandstone, spread rapidly over Manhattan and Brooklyn. Author Edith Wharton called brownstone "the most hideous stone ever quarried." Yet the brownstones were often elegant private residences. Sometimes the facades were simple; other more elaborate facades created a baroque effect; carved terra cotta cornices ornamented the roof and the windows had pediments and bas relief trim.



1853 A shantytown waste was set aside to become Central Park through the efforts of William Cullen Bryant and others. In 1858 a competition was held for its design and Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won the prize.

1855 First "model tenement" was built, running through from Mott to Elizabeth Streets, by The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. The founders' aim was to provide proper living conditions for working people and tenancy was restricted solely to "colored persons." On the upper floors two large rooms were set aside as a hall for concerts, lectures or other social meetings.

1863 The Draft Riots. The Irish slum dwellers rose in defiance of mass conscription which exempted a man who had \$300 to buy his way out. Fifteen hundred deaths occurred in a week of looting, raping, arson, murder and bigotry. The rioters turned against the Negroes as competitors for jobs on the docks and in the factories. Civic leaders were forced to recognize the wretched housing out of which the mobs poured. Out of this came the Sanitary Survey of 1865, which led to the establishment of an independent Board of Health with vast powers.

1867 The first tenement house law set minimum standards for size of rooms, ventilation and sanitation.

"...every house should be provided with good and sufficient water closets and privies and there should not be less than 1 to every 20 occupants...."

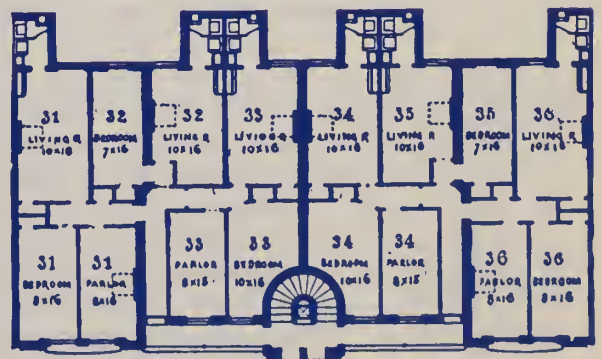
1868 Tenement structures numbered about 15,000 in New York City.

1869 The Stuyvesant, first definitive apartment building, was opened at 142 East 18 Street. Architect Richard Morris Hunt modeled his building after Parisian flats. It was demolished in 1956.

1870 First "private palace", built by William Kissam Vanderbilt at Fifth Avenue and 52 Street, set the pace for elegant mansions. On this site now stands 666 Fifth Avenue, home of the restaurant, Top of the Sixes. The Frick Mansion (1914), one of the last of the parade, cost \$5,500,000 and is now an art museum.

1875 to 1900 Almost 400,000 immigrants entered this country annually, chiefly Italian, Polish, Austro-Hungarians and Russians.

1877 Alfred T. White's model "Home and Tower" buildings, still in use at Hicks and Warren Streets, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, had an interior court and open-air access corridors.



1879 The newspaper, Sanitary Engineer, held a competition for a tenement plan on a 25' x 100' lot which attracted 209 entries. The prize-winning "dumb-bell" plan by James E. Ware was widely condemned.

"The plans merely demonstrate that the problem is insoluble." -- The New York Times.

1879 The lavish Dakota Apartments at Central Park West between 72nd and 73rd Streets were designed by Henry J. Hardenburgh, who later designed the Plaza Hotel. Built about a central drive-in courtyard, this nine-story residence had both passenger and service elevators, a new concept in luxury living. It was recently preserved from demolition and changed to cooperative ownership.



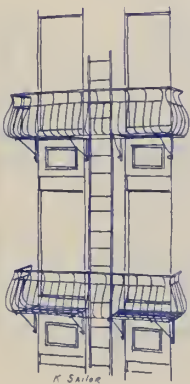
1890 Jacob Riis published his classic exposé of living conditions in the slums, How The Other Half Lives.

"...and why should a man have a better right to kill his neighbor with a house than with an axe in the street?"

1900 Negroes began to replace the Italians and Jews of Harlem.

1900 82,652 tenements housed 70 percent of the population of New York City.

1901 The famous "new-law" Tenement House Act regulated construction of new tenements and improvement of existing ones. Features:



- 70 percent maximum coverage of the lot
- maximum of six stories unless of fireproof construction
- larger courts; no airshafts
- cellars shut off from the rest of the building by a fireproof floor
- stairs for fire escapes instead of vertical ladders
- water closets: in new tenements, one for each apartment; in old, one for every two families
- interior rooms: abolished in new housing; windows cut in room partitions in old housing
- abolition of privies and "school sinks"
- running water in every apartment



- 1904 The first subway, built by August Belmont, was followed by a network of lines which both confirmed existing residential patterns and created new ones.
- 1910 The first "garden apartment," designed by Andrew J. Thomas, was built in Jackson Heights.
- 1910 Forest Hills Gardens, a demonstration project financed by the Russell Sage Foundation, featured conscious orderliness related to a square and to a rapid transit station.
- 1920 Governor Alfred E. Smith warned of the alarming housing shortage in the state. He encouraged the state to initiate a comprehensive progressive housing policy.
- 1920 A state law was passed permitting cities to abate real estate taxes until 1932. It stimulated more than one billion dollars' worth of housing in New York City. An estimated \$300,000,000 in taxes was forgiven as a result of the abatement. Although no income ceilings or rent controls were applied, the city limited the exemptions in order to encourage housing at moderate prices.
- 1924 Sunnyside Gardens, a moderate-income cooperative in Queens, kept to the pattern of the standard city block. The project had two, three and four-story apartment buildings with green commons and play spaces in the interior. The architects were Henry Wright, Clarence Stein and Frederick Ackerman.
- 1926 The Limited Dividend Housing Companies Law permitted condemnation of sites for housing, required limitation of rents and profits, allowed local tax abatement and set income limitations for the tenants.
- 1926 The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, under Abraham Kazan's leadership, built moderate-income cooperative housing projects under the 1926 law. The largest group of tenants (30 percent) was drawn from the garment industry. Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street received a medal from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects commending the builder for

"...the complete elimination of meaningless ornament and the sincerity with which they used the essential elements of the design to achieve esthetic results...."

1929 The Multiple Dwelling Law of New York State superseded the 1901 law as the basic New York City legislation regulating housing standards. It raised standards in hotels and rooming houses as well as residences.

Chief Justice Cardozo upheld the constitutionality of the Multiple Dwelling Law, stating:

"The Multiple Dwelling Act is aimed at many evils.... It seeks to bring about conditions whereby healthy children shall be born, and healthy men and women reared in the dwellings of the great metropolis.... The end to be achieved is more than the avoidance of pestilence or contagion. The end to be achieved is the quality of men and women....If the moral and physical fibre of its manhood and its womanhood is not a State concern, the question is, what is?"

1933 Knickerbocker Village, built under the Limited Dividend Housing Companies Law, used loans from the Federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

1934 The Municipal Housing Authorities Act--the necessary state-enabling legislation--was passed and the New York City Housing Authority was formally established

"...to promote the public health and safety by providing for the elimination of unsanitary and dangerous housing conditions, to relieve congested areas and for the construction and supervision of dwellings and the letting of apartments at reasonable rentals...."

1935 The New York City Housing Authority opened its first apartments in First Houses at Avenue A and Third Street.

"It was tiny [123 apartments]; it set no pattern for future financing; it was a remodeling job, not original construction; it hardly seemed more than proof of the Authority's determination to get started on its job. But it was indeed the first public housing project in the United States...."

1937 The United States Housing Act was passed, acknowledging federal responsibility for the improvement of housing conditions and establishing a pattern of loans and grants to local housing authorities.

- 1938 The State Constitution was amended to permit the state to borrow money and make loans and grants to local housing authorities for public low-rent housing and the clearance and replanning of substandard areas.
- 1939 The New York State Public Housing Law was enacted, and the state borrowed funds for loans for public housing and set aside annual subsidies.
- 1940 Parkchester, the first Metropolitan Life Insurance Company "village," opened in the Bronx. The site covered 192 acres and housed 12,000 families. Random, open arrangement of the buildings covered only 27 percent of the site. Major shopping facilities were included.

"...a master plan for better living...it will go far towards solving part of the housing problem, cutting a fat chunk out of the housing market's \$1800 to \$4500 income group. --Architectural Forum

Henry S. Churchill, a planner, alarmed at the population decline in large cities, chastised Metropolitan.

"It is nothing short of startling that an institution such as Metropolitan Life should in all seriousness propose an enormous development based on an average family size of 2.7 persons, providing only some 400 units with more than two bedrooms out of a total of 12,000 apartments...no wonder there is an exodus to the suburbs...."

Fortune commenting in 1946:

"Parkchester's child population -- 8800--is larger than was anticipated when the apartments were designed for an average of 2.75 occupants...children under four are the most numerous. Parks and sidewalks are alive with women wheeling baby carriages; Parkchester, happily, has 171 perambulator rooms..."



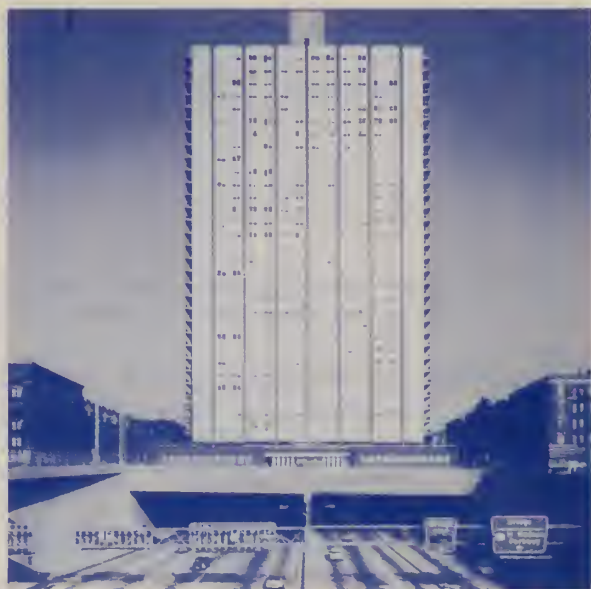
- 1942 Section 608 of the National Housing Act permitted government insurance up to 90 percent of the costs of rental projects. Though successful in stimulating housing (more than 36,000 apartments in New York City), the program became known as the "windfall" program and was discontinued in 1950 as abuses became apparent.

- ✓ 1942 The New York State Redevelopment Companies Law was passed. Its aim has been to clear substandard areas and redevelop them for residence. The developer's return on his investment is limited. The city may condemn property and grant tax exemption.
- 1947 Stuyvesant Town was built by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company under the Redevelopment Companies Law. An extensive tract on the Lower East Side was cleared to make way for this huge development which houses 25,000 persons with a site coverage of 25 percent and a density of 100 families per acre.
- | "...the architecture of the Police State...a nightmare of impersonal regimentation." --Lewis Mumford
- | "It is not only vision, it is prudence and good business, and may I say in all kindness to the New York Life and Equitable Life and Mutual Life (insurance companies) that they should look into this housing proposition and the advantages it offers and they should also provide as much at least as the Metropolitan Life." --Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia
- 1949 Title I of the National Housing Act encourages municipalities to acquire substandard areas and sell them below cost for redevelopment by private investors for residential use. Federal capital grants account for two-thirds of the write-down, while the city absorbs the balance of the loss. This law made possible the bulk of recent slum clearance and redevelopment in New York City. About 1,128 acres have been or are being cleared under this law.
- ✓
- 1951 Fresh Meadows, a development housing 11,000 people in a combination of two 13-story and 137 two-and three-story buildings, was opened in Queens. Built by the New York Life Insurance Company, Fresh Meadows had a suburban-like density of 17 families per acre and was acclaimed by Mumford as the "middle ground between congestion and sprawl."
- ✗ 1955 The state Limited-Profit Housing Companies Law (Mitchell-Lama) aids the construction of middle-income housing by making possible low-interest loans from the city or the state, tax exemption and site condemnation. Profits and tenants' incomes are limited.
- 1957 New York City passed the nation's first Fair Housing Practices Law.

1960 The U.S. Census of Housing classifies 20 percent of New York City's housing inventory as substandard or deteriorating. ✓

1964

Bridge Apartments, a four-building complex housing 960 families, is the first middle-income housing development to use air rights. It rises above the depressed roadways of the Manhattan approaches to the George Washington Bridge.

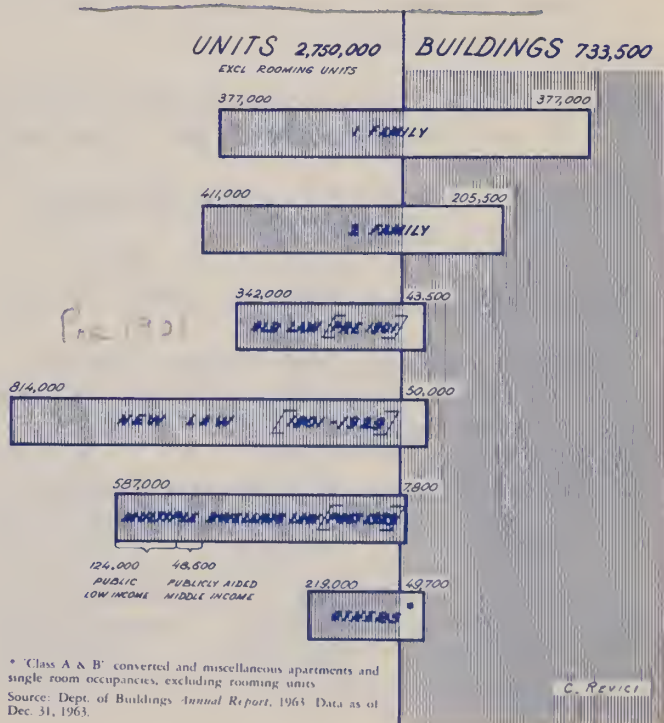


1964 HOUSING STOCK, N.Y.C.

1964

"New units completed have exceeded 30,000 in every year since 1957. The 60,000 new units completed in 1963 was the largest figure since the building boom of the 1920's when annual completions exceeded the 100,000 figure for several years."

--N.Y.C. Housing
Statistics Handbook



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Founded in 1937, the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council is an independent, non-profit civic group, drawing its membership from professionals and laymen interested in the fields of planning, architecture, construction, administration and real estate.

The Council works toward better housing and a well-planned city through programs of education, participation in public activities, and counseling with citizens' groups and official bodies. It tries to strike a balance between the legitimate aspirations of local groups, and the needs of the city as a whole.

The Council is supported by its members, and by corporate contributions and private grants.

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